

**A new law will require high school juniors to take the ACT. Also, we offer secrets to taking the ACT or SAT college entrance exams**

# College Testing Strategies

**I**s your child ready for college academically? Is college the best choice? What are your child's academic strengths and weaknesses?

The first definitive answers to these life-changing questions often come with the results of college entrance exams—the ACT and SAT. Unfortunately, that's too late to do much about it since many students don't take these exams until their senior year of high school and some never take them.

But all of that will change in the next few years for Kentucky students. Here's what parents and students need to know about the important changes ahead.

## **ACT Required and State Funded**

The biggest changes ahead stem from Senate Bill 130, which was overwhelmingly

approved by the 2006 Kentucky General Assembly. Beginning no later than the 2007-2008 school year, every high school junior in Kentucky will be required to take the ACT—at the Department of Education's expense. And that won't be the first time students get a glimpse at how they are faring academically.

"Other states have tried this strategy and found that significantly more students go to college, and they are better prepared when they get there," says Kentucky Senate Majority Leader Dan Kelly, a Springfield attorney who was the lead sponsor of the legislation. "It lets students know early on what their strengths and weaknesses are. Some students who think they aren't going

by Debra Gibson

to college find out they could succeed and should consider it. All of this happens while there is still time to take action."

Additional provisions in the bill require a high school readiness exam in the eighth grade and a college readiness exam in the 10th grade. Students in grades 10–12 may also take the WorkKeys assessment in reading for information, locating information, and applied mathematics, also with initial costs paid by the Kentucky Department of Education.

## **Know What to Expect**

Terry Compton, a guidance counselor at Paintsville High School, applauds the new legislation. She says teachers at Paintsville High School—where 81.1 percent of students go on to college—are already encouraging students to do what will soon

Students are encouraged to learn the section directions prior to taking the ACT, so they can save time for test questions. Photo: ACT

be required. Until now, however, parents had to bear the cost.

"We give our students the plan test (an official preliminary to the ACT) in the 10th grade," Compton says. "That gives them a taste of it. They get that test back with their answers and the correct answers. They can see what they missed. There is also an interest inventory with it that helps them see what vocations and college majors might be right for them. It's a real good place for them to start."

"Then we encourage them to take the ACT early in their junior year. If they are weak in an area, they've got all that year to work on that."

although they are very different tests according to Aaron Hirst, an adjunct faculty member at Northern Kentucky University and an instructor for NKU's Community Connections, which provides prep courses for the exams.

Hirst says the ACT is a comprehensive test of a student's broad knowledge. It is very straightforward, covering:

- Reading, which may come in the form of social science, literature, and science
- Mathematics, covering algebra 1, algebra 2, and geometry
- Science, to determine a student's ability to read and gather information from various charts and graphs, deduce logical outcomes based on a scientific experiment, and support or refute testimony given by two opposing scientists (known as the dueling scientists question), and
- English, for grammar and error checking

There is also an optional writing sample. Students doing this part of the exam are asked to provide an essay within a certain amount of time for critique by ACT.

While content is the same for the SAT, Hirst says it is how the questions are asked that is different.

"For example, in the math section you are given a math problem and two answers," he says. "The answer choices you have are:

- A - answer A is larger
- B - answer B is larger
- C - the answers are equal
- D - the answer cannot be determined from the information provided


"In my opinion, the SAT is a thinking test rather than a recall test," he says. "The ACT is definitely easier."


Students should take whichever test is required by the school of their choice, Hirst says, and should pay attention to the admissions deadlines set by that school to make sure they can have the results sent to the school in time to be considered for admission.


According to Lisa Gross, acting associate commissioner in the Kentucky Department of Education, 76 percent of graduat-


## Help is on the way


by Kathy Witt


 ACT, [www.act.org](http://www.act.org), is an independent, not-for-profit organization that provides more than a hundred assessment, research, information, and program management services in education and workforce development. Students can go to [www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org) for a host of resources for taking the ACT, including sample test questions.

 The College Board, [www.sat.org](http://www.sat.org), is a not-for-profit membership association, composed of more than 5,000 schools, colleges, universities, and other educational organizations, whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity.

 Go Higher KY, [www.gohigherky.org](http://www.gohigherky.org), is the complete guide to attending college in Kentucky. Once students create an account, they can automatically insert information into financial aid and college applications, visit campuses virtually, explore career options, get adult education information, and receive help transferring to another school.

 Jewish Family & Vocational Service in Louisville, (502) 452-6341 or online at [www.jfvs.com](http://www.jfvs.com), offers SAT and ACT preparation workshops to provide students with strategies to improve their scores, help reduce test anxiety, and familiarize students with the test format and testing conditions. This fall, SAT classes will meet on Monday and Tuesday evenings from September 5–October 3. The ACT workshop will meet on Monday and Tuesday evenings from November 13–December 5.

 Established in 1966, Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, [www.kheaa.org](http://www.kheaa.org), is a public corporation and governmental agency of the Commonwealth to improve student access to higher education. KHEAA administers several financial aid programs and disseminates information about higher education opportunities.

 Northern Kentucky University Community Connections, (859) 572-5600 or online at <http://nku.connections.nku.edu>, to search for ACT or SAT test preparation workshops.

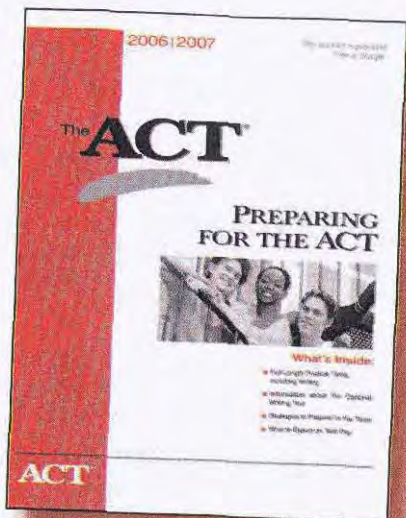
## More on Senate Bill 130

**F**or detailed information and additional provisions of the bill, go to [www.KentuckyLiving.com](http://www.KentuckyLiving.com) and type in "Senate Bill 130" in the Keyword Search box.



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ACTstudent.org offers a variety of test products to prepare students, as well as free online sample test questions and other resources. Photo: ACT

ing seniors took the ACT in 2005 while 8 percent took the SAT, no doubt in large part because state colleges in Kentucky require the ACT.

Back at Paintsville High School, Compton says a seemingly obvious step would help students most with both of the tests.

"The big thing is making sure your kid comes to school," Compton advises parents. "When they're not here, even if

## SAT secrets

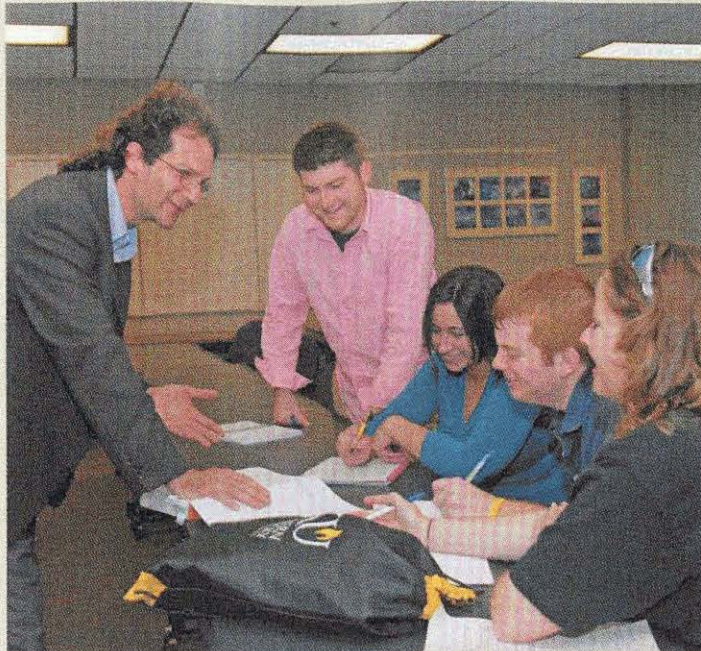
For the secret weapon for taking the SAT—the POE (Process of Elimination)—and whether you should guess or not, go to [www.KentuckyLiving.com](http://www.KentuckyLiving.com) and type in "SAT tips" in the Keyword Search box.



they do the work they missed, they are still missing out. Teachers present material that kids need to learn, and the kids need to be here to take advantage of that."



Allen Feibelman,  
Northern  
Kentucky  
University  
Community  
Connections SAT  
test preparation  
instructor, shares  
some test-taking  
strategies  
with students.  
Photo: Joseph  
Ruh/NKU Senior  
Photographer



# Secrets to Taking the ACT and SAT

by Kathy Witt

One thing is certain when students sit down to take their college entrance exam—the test will ferret out what you know and, perhaps more importantly, what you don't. And there is no way to fudge the knowledge.

"The SAT and ACT tests are written by people who have made it their life's work to find out what the test taker knows," says Aaron Hirst, ACT test prep instructor at NKU Community Connections, the outreach center at Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights.

Not taking their education seriously enough to score near the top of the class or better is, according to Hirst, the number-one mistake students make in taking the SAT and ACT.

Says Hirst: "If students are truly studying a college prep curriculum, then scoring well on the ACT/SAT shouldn't be a problem. Just ask the top 10 percent of any graduating class. They're the ones who are working their tails off and heeding the advice of the adults that are telling them that a solid education pays off. These students don't let the education come to them; they seek it out.

"So, for the vast majority who take the ACT/SAT, when they see a sample test,

they recognize the majority of the material, they just have no mastery of it and therefore will struggle with it while taking the test. Most students wish they had studied harder when they had the chance, but as they say, 'hindsight is 20/20.'"

Is it too late then for students to perform well on these tests? While there is no substitute for actually knowing the material, Hirst says students can try a prep course for review of content, buy several sets of tests and work them, and solicit the help of their teachers.

Before taking either test, students should learn the section directions. You'll then go into the test already understanding the expectations.

When sitting down to the test, time management is one of the student's most important tools.

"Sometimes easy questions can be found in a flash, but more than likely you won't know an easy question from a hard one until you go about answering it," notes Hirst.

His test-taking tip? Read the passages and make notes as you go. Point out significant things. For example, if a passage describes a person's life from childhood to old age, you'd want to mark the transitions so when answering questions regarding a

particular point in time you can easily get back to that spot in the passage.

"You shouldn't spend too much time taking notes but underlining, highlighting, and annotating passages is a good idea," he says. "The more you practice—that is, buying some books with practice tests and doing them—the better you'll be at notating your passages."

Lack of good time management is the number-one mistake that Ellen Shapira sees students make. Shapira is a career and educational counselor at the Jewish Family & Vocational Service. This Louisville-based organization offers comprehensive career/educational assessment and counseling programs for students and their families to help them make decisions regarding college selection.

Shapira cautions students that timing factors are involved with not only the actual test process, but in the scheduling of the tests as well.

"During the test situation, some students rush through too quickly making careless errors, and others work too slowly and are not able to finish many sections of the tests.

"In regard to scheduling, students sometimes start taking the tests too early—during their sophomore year, for instance—and then 'burn out' of the testing process by the summer before their senior year, which is the time when they should be making their peak scores.

"Other students are too late (waiting until their senior year) to start the testing process when it is too late to get in two different test administrations. Waiting too late also impacts their ability to apply for early admissions to some schools and also apply to some scholarships programs."

A word of caution when taking either test: don't fall into the trap of "over thinking" questions.

"The tests are not trying to trick you," says Hirst. "Simply answer the question that was asked without bringing in unsubstantiated information or opinions."

Finally: practice, practice, practice. Practicing can help reduce student anxiety about taking tests. And taking the SAT and ACT more than once can improve your score. ■



# Quick tips

Career and Educational Counselor Ellen Shapira at the Jewish Family & Vocational Service offers three general tips:

**1.** Students should try to take either the SAT or ACT at least twice and maybe at most three times between spring of junior year and fall of senior year. Students should check out the dates for these tests well in advance to avoid scheduling conflicts.

Students who take either the SAT or ACT more than three times are likely to see their scores go down.

**2.** There are different strategies for taking the SAT and the ACT. Says Shapira: "The SAT scoring system works against you for 'guessing.' In other words, if you guess incorrectly, points are subtracted from your total score so you want to use a strategy of guessing rather carefully."

The ACT does not penalize for guessing. If you are running out of time, a good strategy to finish may be to randomly fill in the blanks with the chance you may get a few right.

**3.** Students seem to have fears that they will "flunk" the SAT or ACT and this will keep them from being admitted to college. "High scores are hyped for admission to the most selective colleges, while in reality most colleges and universities accept more average scores. Even very low scores

can be compensated by a good high school record and many colleges and universities accept students with not so good scores."

However, students should remember that high SAT or ACT scores rarely compensate for poor grades as grades are still the best determinant of college success.

## More tips

- Answer easy questions first. They usually precede more difficult ones.
- Spend only seconds on the easiest questions. On the hardest ones, spend no more than one to two minutes.
- Learn the section directions in advance of taking the test.
- You can write in the test book: cross out wrong answers; do scratch work.
- Avoid stray marks on the answer sheet. A machine scores your test and can't distinguish between a correct answer and a careless doodle.
- Mark only one answer per question.
- Keep checking that you are placing your answer in the correct section and number on the answer sheet.
- Always keep track of the time; bring a watch to the test center.

by Kathy Witt